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VZCZCXRO6475
RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHYE #0508 1151330
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 251330Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5397
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS YEREVAN 000508

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, G/AIAG

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: TBIO EARG KFLU AM
SUBJECT: EXERCISING AVIAN FLU RESPONSE PLANS IN ARMENIA

REF: STATE 50514

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (U) This cable, a response to reftel, details the GOAM's
recent actions to improve avian influenza (AI) preparedness,
test existing response plans and improve diagnostic and
response capacity. On March 27, the World Health
Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization
(FAO), with financial support from USAID, jointly organized a
one-day AI tabletop simulation exercise. The simulation
included representatives from the Ministries of Health and
Agriculture and other key agencies who are responsible for
responding in the event of an AI outbreak. It was evident
from the simulation, that Armenia's response capacity for an
AI outbreak in birds is much more well developed than its
capacity to respond to a human outbreak. The GOAM is working
to redress the latter deficiency and we expect to see
improvement in the near future.

GROWING AGRICULTURAL RESPONSE CAPACITY

¶2. (U) Armenia has significantly improved its ability to
respond to a bird AI outbreak. Thanks to a project with
USAID, the Agriculture Ministry has two equipped
rapid-response vehicles which can be deployed in the event of
a suspected outbreak for sampling and quarantine purposes and
a functioning PCR-equipped central veterinary lab to confirm
field diagnostics. The GOAM has also committed to sending
samples to an international laboratory if needed; it prefers
to use the Vladimir lab in Russia over the Wheybridge lab in
the U.K. The Agricultural Ministry also collaborated closely
with USDA, USAID, and the FAO to provide extensive training
and equipment to local veterinarians on AI diagnostics and
response.

LIMITED HUMAN RESPONSE CAPACITY

¶3. (SBU) Armenia's response plan in the event of a human AI
outbreak is much less well developed. In effect, health
authorities have no real response plan. To date, they have
focused more on commodity requests from international donors
than on concrete operational readiness.   Some staff from the
Health Ministry have participated in international trainings
on AI response but local health care providers need
additional training in diagnostics, treatment and crisis
response to react properly to a suspected outbreak. As a
follow-up to the AI simulation exercise held on March 27, WHO
conducted a workshop in Yerevan from April 11-12 to help
hospital directors better understand the WHO's role in the
event of a human outbreak and to provide practical examples
of hospital preparedness planning. The Health Ministry is

concerned that it would have to rely on private labs for
in-country human health diagnostics. The CDC recently
awarded a USD 350,000 grant to the Health Ministry to improve
its AI diagnostic and response capacity.

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COMMUNICATIONS: SPREADING INFORMATION, NOT ALARM
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¶4. (U) While Armenia has yet to have a diagnosed case of H5N1
in either birds or humans, outbreaks in neighboring countries
caused public concern that peaked in March and April 2006.
During that time, many farmers killed their backyard poultry
flocks and the commercial poultry industry virtually
collapsed. Since then, the GOAM, with support from UNICEF,
WHO and USAID, has worked to ensure that the Armenian public
and farmers are well informed without creating undue alarm.
UNICEF has produced flyers and posters with public health and
sanitation messages for local schools. The Agriculture
Ministry, with support from USAID, has developed a bilingual
website (www.birdflu.am) with information on how to mitigate
the risks of the disease and protect bird populations. The
National Program should be posted on this site in the coming
days. On March 30, the Agriculture Ministry and USAID also
held a training session for 40 journalists on AI, so that
their reporting could be more factual and less sensationalist
than it has been in the past.
GODFREY